



IT sector in dire need of more women

By ANGELATHOMPSON

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It was at her all-girls high school that Renee Cuda discovered her love of information technology.

But by the time she took her studies to university, she would be lucky to find another female in tutorials dominated by men.

As Miss Cuda prepares to graduate from the University of Wollongong, the information communications technology field is grappling with the question of how to attract more women into jobs like programming, business analysis, sales and marketing and web content technical writing.

Australia-wide, women account for fewer than one in five students enrolled in ICT degrees, and are similarly under-represented in the workforce.



IT student Renee Cuda had much less trouble getting a job than friends in arts and other degree programs. Picture: GREG TOTMAN

Meanwhile, a skills shortage looms in traditional ICT roles and emerging ones, like social media consulting, web creative designing, mobile apps development, ethical hacking and digital strategising.

Dr Katina Michael, Associate Dean - International in UOW's Faculty of Engineering and Information Sciences, believes more women in the ICT and engineering fields would result in a broader range of products making it to the consumer market, because women tended to be "lateral thinkers, multi-taskers and highly analytical".

"For example, a focus on educational technologies in childhood, privacy-enhancing technologies, and assistive tools for the disabled and impaired," Dr Michael said.

She said attracting women to build technologies and apparatus that makes a difference to the community is vital.

Gender imbalance, if unaltered, could limit the gains the industry would make in coming years, Dr Michael said.

"Building new 'games' can be great fun, but building 'educational games for autistic kids' is an even greater, more honourable aim," she said.

"We need to refocus as an industry and say, 'OK, what do people really need out there to better their quality of life?', instead of [focusing on] what will make us the richest company on earth.

"I believe women are a big part of that solution and recalibration because they have the natural ability to think big but also think personal."

Dr Michael points to the lack of high-profile women in ICT - female equivalents to Bill Gates and Steve Jobs - as a possible contributor to the gender gap.

Phillip Evans, chief executive of ICT company Evanscorp, which has headquarters in Wollongong and abroad, suggests an image problem has also contributed to a decline in female ICT enrolments.

"For women in particular, I think the perception of ICT is male nerds with poor personal hygiene working in an industry that is slowly being offshored to BRIC [Brazil, Russia, India, China] countries.

"This simply isn't the case," he said.

"While there are certain kinds of ICT jobs being moved offshore, they are only a small portion of the workforce and typically are the lower-value roles."

For Ms Cuda, already with strong grades and the skills shortage in her corner, the gender gap will give her an added career advantage.

Months away from graduation, she secured a job as an intern software developer at Wollongong firm GBST.

While friends in arts and other degrees were "fighting for the same three roles", none of her IT peers had that problem.

"A few people in my degree are not even going out and seeing what jobs are out there, because they know every company needs IT - there's so much opportunity in it."